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Mark Hyman
Global Care Unlimited

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A Firsthand Experience with Mine Action: On the Ground with the Organization of American States in Nicaragua

Founder and chairperson of Global Care Unlimited, Inc., Mark Hyman, has been actively working with the global landmine issue for the past three years. This past June, he visited Nicaragua to witness the effects of landmines firsthand and to find out how his middle schoolers could help. This piece describes what he found there.

by Mark Hyman, Global Care Unlimited, Inc.

Introduction

For the last three years, as coordinator of the Tenaflly Middle School Landmine Awareness Club of Tenaflly, New Jersey, and founder/chairperson of the student-inspired humanitarian service organization, Global Care Unlimited, Inc., I have assumed the responsibility for introducing middle school students to the

facts, topics and humanitarian issues regarding the global landmine crisis. Since the beginning of this process, I have recognized both a strong desire and educational need to augment my understanding of the humanitarian dimensions of mine action, and in turn that of my students, through a field trip to a mine-affected country.

This June I reached this goal through a trip to Nicaragua under the guidance and supervision of the Organization of American States (OAS). The visit,

organized by William A. McDonough, coordinator of the OAS Mine Action Program, provided an extraordinary opportunity for me to gain a firsthand understanding of demining and victim assistance programs supported by the OAS. Additionally, this trip afforded me an opportunity to develop a sense of the lifestyle. The purpose of this article is to share my discoveries regarding the humanitarian mine action programs offered by the OAS, as well as, to provide my impressions, where relevant, of life in Nicaragua.

Background

The Catalyst for the Formation of a School-Based Mine Action Initiative

My decision to visit Nicaragua was a natural outgrowth of a three-year mine action initiative organized and developed by the students of the Tenaflly Middle School Landmine Awareness Club and myself. Our initial interest in the global landmine issue emerged from a keynote address delivered by American landmine survivor and activist, Ken Rutherford, at a human rights day event held at Tenaflly Middle School on February 24, 1999. In addition to Mr. Rutherford's powerful and moving testimony regarding his life-changing encounter with a landmine, representatives from the UNA-USA delivered presentations to our entire student body regarding their Adopt-A-Minefield program. A display of a landmine exhibit in our school lobby, on loan from UNICEF, provided a powerful visual component to the overall landmine education offered on Human Rights Day.

This powerful exposure to the global landmine issue and its impact on innocent lives provided the impetus for forming our middle school landmine awareness club and adopting a mine-affected village.

Global Care Unlimited's Successful Adoption of a Mine-Affected Village

After guiding the students through research about the global landmine crisis, the students and I selected the mine-affected village of Podzvzd in Bosnia-Herzegovina as their adopted village. Following the formation of Global Care Unlimited, Inc. in February 2000, we began a year-long mine action initiative aimed at educating Tenaflly and surrounding communities about global landmine issues and raising sufficient funds to demine an emergency area of Podzvzd near the Ale Husidic Elementary School. After a year of tireless work on the part of the students, Global Care Unlimited, Inc., supported by a matching grant from the State Department Office of Humanitarian Demining Programs (PM/HDP), achieved their goal of raising \$30,000 for demining Podzvzd. This achievement was celebrated at Tenaflly Middle School on February 8, 2001, through a signing ceremony between Jernej Cimperse, Director of the Slovenian International Trust Fund; Donald Patierno, Director of the PM/HDP; and myself, on behalf of the students and supportive adults of Global Care Unlimited, Inc.

A Connection Between Global Care Unlimited and a Landmine Movie Filmed in Nicaragua

Prior to Global Care Unlimited's planning for its 2001-2002 mine action initiative, I was contacted by filmmaker Bob Altman, who was developing a movie about landmines based in Nicaragua for the Hallmark Entertainment Channel. Mr. Altman's goal was to create a dramatic story that would represent the plight of mine-affected citizens worldwide. He hoped such a visualization of the impact of landmines would inspire the interest of American youth in learning more about landmines, as well as to promote the capacity of youth to make a

constructive difference in mine action.

Although our demining funds had been given to assist a Bosnian village, Mr. Altman felt strongly that Global Care Unlimited, Inc. represented an exemplary program for youth participation and leadership in mine action. Consequently, he decided to cite Global Care Unlimited, Inc. as the student organization responsible for assisting in the demining of the mine-affected Nicaraguan village featured in his movie, "The Garden."

Turning Our Attention to Nicaragua, the Organization of American States and Programs to Assist Landmine Survivors

The anticipated attention and credit afforded Global Care Unlimited, Inc. by Mr. Altman's upcoming landmine film propelled me to research the actual landmine problem in Nicaragua to find out how we might actually assist Nicaragua. During this process, I contacted William A. McDonough of the OAS Mine Action Program. Our conversation revealed a perfect match of interests. While the cost for supporting demining operations in Nicaragua was prohibitive, Mr. McDonough informed me that the OAS had just contracted with INATEC, a local vocational skills training center in Boaca, to provide job training to Nicaraguan landmine survivors. For approximately \$1,300 per client, INATEC would provide courses in a wide variety of vocational skills aimed at assisting the reintegration of landmine survivors into their local workplace. After this correspondence Global Care Unlimited, Inc. committed to sponsoring landmine survivors attending the INATEC program.

Global Care Unlimited Organizes and Hosts a Mine Action Conference for Youth

On March 7, 2002, Global Care Unlimited, Inc. hosted a mine action conference aimed at educating middle and high school youth about the global landmine problem and encouraging their participation in our burgeoning youth coalition for mine action initiatives. The conference featured a keynote address by Ken Rutherford, a prominent array of

mine action presenters, including landmine survivors, demining professionals and mine action advocates from the OAS, the United Nations, the State Department, Vietnam Veterans of America Foundation and Landmine Survivors Network.

In addition to donating \$10,000 (including a matching State Department grant) toward the demining of another Balkan minefield in Gornja Sopotnica, Global Care Unlimited, Inc. officially became the first mine action organization to support the OAS-sponsored job training program at INATEC by providing \$1,300 to sponsor Meylin, a Nicaraguan landmine survivor who had lost both of her legs at the age of nine.

Following the March conference, Mr. McDonough, per my request, arranged an itinerary aimed at providing a full picture of the OAS Nicaraguan mine action program. The itinerary included visits to CENAPRORTO and INATEC to show OAS-sponsored rehabilitation programs for landmine survivors, as well as a trip to a minefield and attendance at a national stockpile destruction of 10,000 landmines.

General Impressions of Nicaragua

The Pervasiveness of Poverty

I arrived on June 15, 2002, for a ten-day stay in Nicaragua. While I had watched numerous videos and read extensively about the landmine issue, I had never traveled outside the United States and Canada, much less to a third world country such as Nicaragua. I knew that Nicaragua was considered possibly the second poorest country in the Western Hemisphere. Yet, while I was driven from the airport to my hotel in the capital city of Managua, I found myself riveted to the images presenting themselves before me. In particular, I was stunned by the extent and nature of the poverty evident along the streets of Managua. The majority of homes appeared to consist only of pieces of discarded aluminum or other scrap material nailed together to provide the most basic shelter. Uncollected garbage and stray debris was commonplace, as

■ Mark Hyman (left) and OAS translator Nocksoly Acevedo (right) talking with a landmine survivor at CENAPRORTO in Managua.



Nicaraguan schoolgirls walking on a path that passes a minefield in Mantiguas, Nicaragua.



were people selling various cheap items along the streets and at stoplights. It was truly an encounter with poverty unlike any I had ever imagined.

During the two days prior to the beginning of my official itinerary with the OAS as well as for several days afterwards, I took the opportunity to explore Managua and much of the surrounding countryside and to gain an orientation regarding Nicaraguan culture, topography and socio-economic conditions.

The pervasiveness of the poverty throughout the country was its most dominant and haunting attribute. On more occasions than I wish to admit, I found myself pointing in the direction of a roadside dwelling and asking my guide, "Is that a home?" The few houses that revealed some degree of wealth were invariably flanked by very poor dwellings. Even by trip's end, I was not able to accept or fully internalize the level or extent of poverty in Nicaragua, and the commensurate suffering and socio-economic handicaps such suffering suggested.

An Overview of Survivor Assistance Programs Supported by the OAS

Fitting of Prosthetics and Physical Rehabilitation: A Necessary First Step in Treating Landmine Survivors

During the first two days of my visit, I was able to visit the OAS national office for mine action (OEA) as well as the Nicaraguan Ministry of Defense, where I met high-ranking Nicaraguan officials, Defense Minister Dr. Jose Adan Guerra and the Defense Vice-minister and Executive Secretary of the National Demining Commission. These meetings oriented me with some of the key players in Nicaraguan mine action.

However, the highlight of these two days occurred on June 18th with my visit to CENAPRORTO, the National Center of Prostheses and Orthoses. The OAS-sponsored center provides a full spectrum of rehabilitation services to landmine survivors; in addition to housing a factory for the creation of artificial limbs and feet, the center maintains a professional rehabilitation team consisting of a psychologist, social worker and physical therapist, a training area for assisting clients with the use of their prosthesis or

orthosis, and a dozen or so beds for clients in need of extended housing.

CENAPRORTO offers the necessary first steps in the process of rehabilitating landmine survivors. These steps include psychological counseling and orientation, fitting of prosthetic and orthotic devices, and training in the use of these devices. Both the psychologist and physical therapist whom I interviewed stressed the importance of seeing the client in a holistic manner, i.e., of recognizing that factors such as the emotional and psychological state of the client play a key role in determining his/her success. Consequently, the professionals at CENAPRORTO adopt a team approach that promotes and monitors an understanding of a client's home life, frame of mind and expectations upon entering therapy. It was evident to me that both the psychologist and physical therapist approached their work with insight, compassion and a commitment to provide the best possible services to each client.

Upon arriving at CENAPRORTO, there were several landmine survivors receiving services, as well as other clients who had lost limbs due to disease or other circumstances. While each of the survivors I spoke with expressed warmth and an interest in sharing their story, one man in particular stood out in my mind. He was missing his right leg, his stump rounded off at the knee. At the time of our meeting, his prosthetic leg was being repaired, so he moved around with crutches.

Accompanied by my OAS translator and guide, Nocksoly Acevedo Vivas, I approached this man. When I had explained, video camera in hand, that my purpose was to educate my American students about the impact of landmines, he promptly laid backwards upon his mat and exposed his stump for an extended period. His complete lack of self-consciousness about his appearance was uplifting, even inspiring. We then proceeded to conduct an animated thirty-minute conversation in which he offered his perspective of acceptance regarding his physical disability and shared his goal of rejoining his family and obtaining independent work as a shoe repairman.

The Critical Next Step in Rehabilitation: Developing Vocational Skills in Landmine Survivors

The following day, I visited INATEC to see firsthand the skills being taught to landmine survivors following their "graduation" from physical rehabilitation programs such as the ones offered by CENAPRORTO. This visit was of particular importance to me and my students back in New Jersey because of Global Care Unlimited's sponsorship of Meylin, as well as our expressed interest in sponsoring other landmine survivors. After an orientation by the program director, we proceeded on a tour of the facilities. (It should be noted that, in addition to landmine survivors, other persons with disabilities also qualified for and received vocational services.)

I was escorted into several work areas in which clients were performing and practicing a variety of tasks and skills, such as woodworking and welding. The sounds of drilling, chiseling and hammering were prominent as clients worked on a variety of independent projects. All the clients in these work areas were men; the majority appearing to be between 20 and 40 years old. Their demeanors were serious and focused, but they were very willing to speak at length about their accidents, their acquisition of skills at INATEC, and their aspirations for employment upon completion of their courses.

Each of the men I interviewed had suffered a distinctive physical disability due to a landmine. One survivor needed prosthetics for both legs; a second client had an artificial left arm and hook for a hand; a third had suffered extreme facial disfigurement. This last client spoke quite graphically but matter-of-factly about the medical procedures that attempted to salvage and reshape his scarred face and misshapen nose. In fact, all the survivors I interviewed recalled the circumstances of their landmine accidents freely and without overt sadness or anger. Instead, I got the unmistakable impression that these men had accepted their status as survivors, had won battles with despair and hopelessness that must initially have plagued them, and now were striving

wholeheartedly toward ascending the vital last rung of their rehabilitation journey: acquiring a skill that might help them gain employment. Each man stressed this latter wish of obtaining work with deep conviction. Independent employment for these survivors was tantamount to fully reclaiming their wounded lives.

In addition to these men, I had the privilege of meeting Meylin in INATEC's computer lab. At the time of my visit, Meylin was the sole female client at INATEC, an indication of the prevalence of landmine accidents among males in Nicaragua. She had lost her legs at the age of nine, and now, 12 years later, she was striving to obtain sufficient competency with word processing. After I explained my connection, as chairperson of Global Care Unlimited, Inc., to her sponsorship at INATEC, she smiled and spoke about her accident and her professional aspirations. However, I detected a sadness in her that was present even beneath her smile. Silently, I hoped that her inner strength, as with all these clients, would ultimately win this battle for her and land her a job, and the heightened sense of dignity and self-worth that it would provide.

Visiting a Minefield in Mantiguas

"Peligro Campo Minado"

The same day of my visit to INATEC, I was escorted to Front Three of the Nicaraguan demining operations in Mantiguas to gain my first experience at the site of an actual minefield. This experience left an indelible impression.

As I was escorted in the OAS van on the dirt road leading to the minefield, I passed two young girls walking in the same direction. They carried backpacks and wore the white shirts and blue skirts commonly worn by Nicaraguan schoolgirls. They appeared to be about nine or ten years old, the same age as Meylin when she suffered her mine accident twelve years ago. They walked alone, without adult escorts.

Our van had traveled no more than the length of a football field when yellow caution tape attached to tree stumps

appeared along the left side of the road to mark the perimeter of a minefield. The tape contained a repeating message throughout its length, "Peligro Campo Minado" or "Danger Minefield." Between each repetition of this eerie refrain resided a black image of a skull and bones. At intervals just inside the minefield's perimeter, red warning signs containing the skull and bones image also appeared. This universal symbol of imminent danger and lurking death produced, as intended, an ominous and forbidding feeling.

I thought of the schoolchildren who would shortly be passing this minefield and its accompanying signs and warnings, and I wondered how these images might affect their view of the world; their understanding of the way in which the adult world resolves its differences.

An Orientation: 17,000 People Affected

Upon arriving at the army demining tent, I heard a presentation, complete with a national map and detailed charts, regarding the accomplishments of the demining team at Front Three, the status of the demining in progress, and the goals, strategies and timetable for completion of their mission. (It should be noted that, in Nicaragua, demining is conducted by army personnel, under the supervision of trained deminers from Central and South America.) Implements for the detection, tagging and removal of landmines were visible on a table inside the meeting tent.

During his presentation, the demining supervisor stated that 17,000 people lived in the proximity of the minefield. I thought again of the unescorted children walking up the path, and recognized vividly the importance of providing mine education to villagers, and especially children, living in mine-affected communities.

Demonstration of the Manual and Dog Detection Technique

The next phase of our experience involved a demonstration of the procedure used to detect and tag a landmine, as well as to prepare the ground for its removal. The process included the

use of a mine-sniffing dog for mine detection, followed by the placement of a yellow flag to mark the presence of a possible landmine. Then the human or manual deminer used a probing device to determine the precise location of the dog's discovery. Since in this case a mock mine was found (as opposed to a piece of scrap metal, for example), the deminer proceeded to meticulously snip and cut the surrounding grass and vegetation to prepare the ground for the landmine's later removal.

The process lasted about twenty minutes. Despite the knowledge that this process was being conducted under simulated conditions, within a mock minefield and containing fake landmines, it was not hard to imagine the presence of a real landmine and the accompanying danger associated with its detection and removal. The mood of extreme seriousness and concentration transmitted by the deminer and the observing army personnel reinforced the gravity of this procedure.

A Panoramic View of the Minefield: Its Proximity to Village Life

After this demonstration, we followed the deminers up a hill to gain a panoramic perspective of the minefield. Several aspects of this perspective jolted me. First, this view revealed the enormity of the actual minefield, approximately 600 meters long or about six American football fields, according to Carlos Orozco, the national coordinator for the OAS mine action programs. Mr. Orozco also drew my attention to the numerous yellow flags visible within the minefield. Those flags, the same type used to designate the detection of a mock mine in the previous demonstration, represented locations at which actual landmines had been detected. Perhaps 50 or more flags flew within the minefield as a testament to the deadly seriousness of this demining mission.

The second striking aspect to this view was the proximity of shelters and the local village of Mantiguas to the minefield. To these residents, the minefield provided a graphic daily reminder of the consequences of war upon civilians, even after the cessation of hostilities.

But the last visual impression from this view was the most powerful: that of three children walking along the road past the yellow caution tape demarcating the presence of the minefield. Apparently, these children were returning home from school, walking along the only path connecting their home to the school in Mantiguas. I was reminded of a photograph I had received from our adopted village in Podzvizd in which schoolchildren were walking to school in single file behind an adult. I wondered, "How many thousands of children must walk past skulls and bones and menacing reminders of a war's deadly residue on a daily basis? How might such daily encounters with danger affect these children? How much of childhood innocence and wonder might these images destroy, to be replaced by feelings of insecurity and suspicion?"

While overlooking the Mantiguas minefield, I asked the demining supervisor about any mine-related accidents that had occurred to the local population. He stated that eight people had been victims of landmines, five of whom had died. Apparently, none of these were children. He also claimed that 50 cattle had been killed while grazing.

As we drove back down the hill toward the minefield, I suddenly noticed a scene and asked my driver to stop the van: just off the road, a short distance from the minefield, several dozen cattle lay in the shade of the trees, grazing or lounging sleepily.

Witness to a Massive Destruction of Landmines

The following day, I was invited by the OAS to witness the destruction of 10,000 landmines from the Nicaraguan national stockpile in accordance with their commitment, as a signatory to the Ottawa Convention or Mine Ban Treaty. The event was attended by numerous dignitaries and representatives from organizations involved with mine action in Nicaragua and presided over by Minister of Defense, Dr. Jose Adan Guerra.

The location in which the detonation was set to occur lay about two miles away from our observation area. Yet

all attendees were given earplugs to buffer us from the auditory impact of the explosions. Five detonation lines extended from five buttons at our observation area to the detonation site. Five people were given the honor of pressing a detonation button. And five massive shrieking explosions provided titanic visual and sonic evidence of the simultaneous destruction of thousands of landmines, and of the commitment of Nicaragua to eliminate the threat of landmines from their borders.

Closing Thoughts

The presence of landmines and their impact on mine-affected civilians and communities graphically reveals the destructive consequences of the inability of particular peoples and nations to resolve conflict at a given time in their history. Tragically, with respect to landmines, the cessation of hostilities does not concurrently ensure the cessation of victims of war. All peoples and nations carry an undeniable moral responsibility to work towards reducing, and ultimately eliminating altogether, the causes which produce military conflict, and which in turn lead to the laying of minefields. As humanity strives to achieve this ideal, we must accept the humanitarian responsibility for doing all we can to heal the wounds of innocent civilians produced by war and conflict. And, I believe, we must do all we can to educate humanity about the presence and consequence of landmines and support those organizations, like the OAS, seeking to remove mines and restore dignity and self-worth to landmine survivors. ■

Contact Information

Mark Hyman
Chairperson
Global Care Unlimited, Inc.
P.O. Box 923
Tenafly, New Jersey 07670
Tel: 201-664-5288
Mobile: 201-519-6416
E-mail: mhyman@tenafly.k12.nj.us
mhyman@globalcareunlimited.org